

Vivian Weil's Commentary on "Student Publishes"

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Stevens's experience suggests that this graduate department puts a premium on graduate students' publishing work before finishing their PhDs. The department does not ensure that students are familiar with conventions and procedures governing publishing in this field, however. It is careless, if not unfair, to encourage students to publish while failing to give them an appreciation of publication practices and standards.

Cordage's supervision of Steven's first paper is irresponsible. Limiting himself to one student (Stevens) because of his responsibilities as department chair, Cordage owes him the same careful attention owed any student. Evidently, Cordage does not look carefully at Stevens's first paper before encouraging him to submit it to an obscure journal. When Cordage belatedly gets around to studying the paper, he realizes that it merits publication in a more prestigious journal. Omitting to inform Stevens of his discovery, Cordage revises the paper on his own and submits it for publication in a well-regarded journal, without the student's knowledge. His actions in excluding the student from the revision process and taking over the student's work are indefensible. This action is not only an abuse of power. Cordage also denies Stevens an excellent opportunity to learn how to prepare a paper for publication in a highly ranked journal and to learn conventions of publishing in the materials science field. In a gesture that reflects an image of his student as a mere subordinate rather than a budding colleague, Cordage informs the student only when the paper is accepted - not in person, but by email.

Understandably, Cordage's action leaves Stevens confused and disturbed. Do Cordage's actions amount to publishing the same paper twice? Is it legitimate to do that? Having been excluded from the revision process, Stevens is reluctant to raise such questions with Cordage, fearful of "making waves." Seeing nowhere to turn for answers to his questions, Stevens does nothing. His puzzlement and timidity about asking questions show the damage from Cordage's high-handed treatment of him

with respect to the second submission.

Stevens does not forget the incident. Months later, he is dismayed to discover that Cordage's publishing record contains a large fraction of papers published once in conference proceedings and once in a journal. Now Stevens must confront the issue, in all likelihood, even more stymied about what to think and where to turn. Unless he has relationships with other senior members of the department or someone trustworthy and knowledgeable outside the department, he has no choice but to raise his questions with Cordage. He could prepare by seeking advice from someone knowledgeable in a research office or ethics center, for example, about how to raise his questions in a tactful way, seeking information and guidance without judging prematurely.

Because the questions that disturb Stevens concern issues of importance for the responsible conduct of science and require careful consideration, it is unfortunate that Stevens feels blocked from raising them with his adviser. Discussion might have brought out justification for publishing the second version of Stevens's own paper. If the work merits greater visibility, publishing the second version can be ethically justifiable so long as the prior publication is acknowledged. That is so despite the fact that the second version is a result of Cordage's scanty attention to the first version. Investigators can have good reasons for republishing work (for example, when they make changes in interpretation). These are matters to be aired in graduate departments and research groups. Questions about what makes papers the same or different and how different they must be to count as distinct should also generate worthwhile and interesting discussions in departments and research groups. Lacking information about Cordage's "duplicate" publications, we cannot say whether they were justified or not. Assuredly, the later publication should acknowledge the earlier one.

Interdisciplinary research raises additional issues because the findings may be of interest to quite distinct audiences, each associated with a different journal or set of journals. Members of interdisciplinary collaborations should anticipate this issue and should agree -- before problems come to the fore -- on publication arrangements that can be publicly defended if they are not already compatible with journals' policies. Again, prior publication or publication in other venues should be acknowledged. That is required not only to prevent underhanded dealing but also to guide other investigators and readers to other versions of or perspectives on the findings.

Cordage's supervision of his graduate student cannot be defended, ethically speaking. It appears that a case can be made to justify publishing Stevens's work a second time in a well-regarded journal. As to Cordage's publication record, we do not have enough information to pass judgment. However, the practices it reflects should be a matter of open discussion in the department.